



Mark Lipovetsky

Pussy Riot as the Trickstar

1.....	42
2.....	45
3.....	47
4.....	48
5.....	51
Bio.....	52
Bibliography.....	53
Suggested Citation.....	55

Abstract: In his article, Mark Lipovetsky analyses Pussy Riot's punk-prayer and the public discussion following the event. The author situates Pussy Riot's performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as the cultural return to and rebirth of the trickster trope – which was extremely powerful in the Soviet period but visibly declined in its cultural significance in post-Soviet times. Within this tradition Pussy Riot represents a rare instance of the “trickstar” (Marilyn Jurich), a female trickster, undermining not only the socio-political but first and foremost the gender regime of the society, challenging sexism and gender repression. Analyzing Pussy Riot's performance and its perception, Lipovetsky's article argues that the Pussy Riot debate has revealed such flaws in the liberal discourse as the silent equation of moral values with religious doctrines; hierarchical, essentialist and, fundamentally, pre-modern, understanding of culture (rejecting contemporary art for its lack of “harmony”); and, most importantly, the allegiance to patriarchal stereotypes. The shared values that determine these flaws, appear not so different from the conservatives' rage against “blasphemy” and the assault on the national “spiritual ties” (“dukhovnye skrepy”, to use Putin's words); and their aggressive “defence” of “eternal” moral/religious values epitomized by the disgust towards contemporary art. The discourse triggered by Pussy Riot within the liberal intelligentsia reveal the hypocrisy of the liberal opposition, which supported the “girls” only as an irritant to their enemies, while not so secretly despising them as silly manipulated puppets who should be physically punished for their shameful transgression. Furthermore, this debate laid bare the responsibility of neo-traditionalist ideology, shared by many representatives of liberal intelligentsia, for the Putin regime's ideology.

Keywords: Pussy Riot; Russia; Moscow; feminism; trickster, trickstar; punk; performance; patriarchy



The Pussy Riot performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was discussed from multiple perspectives resulting in literally hundreds, if not thousands, of articles, comments, and blogs.¹ The punk-group members presented themselves and were viewed as heirs to the political dissent of the 1960s and 1970s and the successors to the tradition of holy fools. Their performance was interpreted as a challenge to the Putin regime and as a protest against the political alliance between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state; as the revitalization of the avant-garde's political activism and as a valid part of the post-war history of political/anti-clerical performances worldwide (beginning with the Lettrists' Notre-Dame Affair of 1950).

My approach to Pussy Riot is much less ambitious: I see this group and its punk-prayer as the cultural return to and rebirth of the trickster trope – which was extremely powerful in the Soviet period but visibly declined in its cultural significance in post-Soviet times. I believe that this approach situates Pussy Riot in Soviet/post-Soviet cultural history as a legitimate, yet radically novel phenomenon.

As I argued in my book *Charms of the Cynical Reason: The Trickster's Transformations in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*, the trickster constitutes one of the most important tropes in twentieth-century Russian culture. Since the 1920s, the trickster archetype has been represented by such extremely popular literary characters as Il'ia Erenburg's Khulio Khurenito, Isaak Babel's Benia Krik, Iuri Olesha's Ivan Babichev, Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender, Aleksei Tolstoi's Buratino, Mikhail Bulgakov's Woland with his host of tricksterish demons, Aleksandr Tvardovskii's Vasilii Tërkin, Venedikt Erofeev's Venichka and Gurevich, and Fazil' Iskander's Sandro to name just a few.

Characteristically, all Russo-Soviet tricksters are male. The virtual absence of female tricksters testifies to the profoundly patriarchal character of Soviet culture, even in its non-conformist aspects.

The trickster is simultaneously transgressive and sympathetic, but transgressions that are acceptable for men are incompatible with the image of the “proper” woman, and in the patriarchal context these transgressions inevitably foreclose any possibility of empathizing with her.

From this perspective, Pussy Riot members have introduced in a revolutionary way to Russian culture a collective figure of the “trickstar” – a female trickster, undermining not only socio-political but first and foremost the gender regime of the society, challenging sexism and gender repression. According to Marilyn Jurich (1989: 30, 3), who has coined this term: “the trickstar frequently aspires to self-determination for other than personal reasons; she hopes to expose the hypocrisies and stupidities in the social establishment [...] Tradition, however – that tradition supported by male power – often prefers to see the trickstar as menacing, her tricks as self-serving.”

1

Although the list of scholarly works on the trickster as a mythological and literary hero includes hundreds of titles, this field of research emerged only in the nineteenth century and developed exponentially in the post-war period.² Anthropologists of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century note the ambivalence of the trickster figure in folklore and myth and try to interpret the “baser” traits of the trickster as either the outcome of the degradation of the culture hero (Daniel Brinton) or the underdevelopment of archaic cultures devoid of altruistic values (Franz Boas). The latter point of view appears in Carl G. Jung's commentary to Paul Radin's famous work *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*:

1 For the performance in question see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPDKJbTQRCY>.

2 On the history of the trickster see studies: William G. Doty and William J. Hynes (1993), Barbara Babcock-Abrahams (1975), and Robert H. Lowie (1990).

...we can see why the myth of the trickster was preserved and developed: like many other myths, it was supposed to have a therapeutic effect. It holds the earlier low intellectual and moral level before the eyes of the more highly developed individual, so that he shall not forget how things looked yesterday (Jung 1972: 207).

However, in the same volume Karl Kerényi (1972: 185) first brings up the cultural importance of the trickster's ambivalence:

Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is trickster. His function in an archaic society, or rather the function of his mythology, of the tales told about him, is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, and experience of what is not permitted.

This philosophical approach to the study of the trickster gained new support with the publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss's work on the structure of myth, in which the trickster was given the purpose of mediator who guarantees communication between the binary oppositions that organize the myth. To the trickster-mediator, who unites in himself the traits of the culture hero and the buffoon, Lévi-Strauss assigned the role of the symbolic mechanism which overcomes contradictions by means of bricolage, tricks or transgression. A more post-structuralist understanding of the trickster emerged in the 1980s-90s on the basis of this structuralist conception, cogently summarized in the anthology *Mythical Trickster Figure* edited by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, as well as the monograph *Trickster Makes The World* by Lewis Hyde. According to this conception, the very traits of the trickster that instilled the most doubt in the older generation of scholars, namely his destructive impulses, came to be understood as the founding forces of language and culture: "The trickster discovers creative fabulation, feigning, and fibbing, the playful construction of fictive worlds," he is a mediator "who works 'by means of a lie that is really a truth, a deception that is in fact a revelation'" (Hyde 1998: 45, 72).

In Soviet culture, a similar understanding of the trickster's role was reached much earlier, namely in Mikhail Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and carnival culture (written in the 1940s, first published in 1963), as well as in his "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (written in the late 1930s, first published in 1975), in particular in the section "The Functions of the Rogue, Clown and Fool in the Novel." The traits of these characters permit the forging of a direct link to the semantic of the trickster trope, who unites all the different personae, with Bakhtin's philosophy of carnival culture and carnivalization:

These figures are laughed at by others and *themselves* as well. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure... their entire function consists in externalizing things (true enough, it is not their own being they externalize, but a reflected, alien being—however, that is all they have) (Bakhtin 1981: 159-160).

However, in Soviet culture tricksters have acquired new functions responsible for their cult-like popularity. The trickster trope provided a fertile ground for the cultural representation of a non-official version of the Soviet modern subject. It is telling that in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno use Odysseus, an archetypal image of the trickster, for their characterization of the "instrumental reason" produced by modernity. They detect the prototype of this brand of reason's main principle—"the adaptation of the ratio to its contrary"—in the trickster's play with numerous, mutually annihilating identities:

...the subject Odysseus denies his own identity, which makes him a subject, and himself alive by imitating the amorphous. [...] He acknowledges himself to himself by denying himself under the name of Nobody; he saves his life by losing himself (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 60, 67).

Soviet tricksters did indeed embody the rootlessness and arbitrariness of the identity-production

needed for survival (Sheila Fitzpatrick 2005). Speaking more sociologically, Soviet tricksters personified the spirit of the hidden, yet ubiquitous, “second”, informal, social order based upon blat, and similar social and economic relations; in Alena Ledeneva’s (1998: 46) apt formulation, these numerous practices and infrastructures constituted a clear transgression of social norms and even laws, but this very regime of the everyday transgression “enabled the Soviet system to function and made it tolerable.”³

The Soviet trickster—in exact correspondence with Horkheimer and Adorno’s definition of “instrumental reason”—“saves his life by losing himself.” This trickster’s ambivalent, liminal and playful position best corresponded to the Soviet “shadow ideology,” or more precisely: the double-faced, self-subverting politics of Soviet socialism. An astute characterization of this phenomenon was given by Slavoj Žižek in the book *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*:

A whole series of markers delivered, between the lines, the injunction that such official exhortation was not to be taken too literally, that a cynical attitude towards the official ideology was what the regime really wanted—the greatest catastrophe for the regime would have been for its own ideology to be taken seriously, and realized by its subjects (Žižek 2001: 91).⁴

The trickster trope, placed in this context, obtains its socio-cultural significance as the reflection of irresolvable contradictions and yawning gaps within the social universe, primarily within the existence of ordinary citizens whose loyalty and “normalcy” were inseparable from their criminal and semi-criminal

participation in the “black market” economy, sociality and politics. The Soviet trickster not only reveals the duplicity in meaning, but uses this gap as a liminal zone to stage his transgressive “theatre” thus presenting it as artistically appealing and playful—in a word, charming. The trickster, using comedy to reveal asystemic elements inherent in Soviet economics, sociality and even politics, paradoxically overcomes these contradictions, enacting communication between the disparate planes of Soviet society through artistic metamorphoses. This communication (mediation) is based on the transformation of everything solid into the apotheosis of ambivalence, and tangibly demonstrates the uncertainty and ambiguity in the whole spectrum of societal “truths” and self-definitions—ideological (*Khulio Khurenito*), socio-economic (diptych about Ostap Bender), philosophical and religious (*Master i Margarita, Moskva-Petushki*), moral (*Osennii marafon, 1965* and *Beregis’ avtomobilia, 1980*). The very fact that Soviet children’s culture—by default intended to produce clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, the permissible and the banned etc.—turned out to be the breeding ground for various tricksters (from Buratino to “adopted” Karlsson)—speaks volumes about the paradoxical wholeness of Soviet culture. In other words, while the Soviet trickster exposes zones of ambivalence between the various disconnected aspects of Soviet civilization, he also generates a resonance between its mutually contradictory components, thus filling the symbolic “holes” in its fabric and producing a sense of unity, albeit invariably ironic, if not openly ridiculous.

This is the reason why Soviet tricksters became true superstars of Soviet civilization (in its official and non-official realms alike), serving as the cultural justification for dangerous, non-heroic and cynical survival, by elevating it through their virtuoso performances to a level of joyful, cheeky and, most importantly, free play, and by transforming shameless mimicry to a basically non-pragmatic art of transgressive life. Using Peter Sloterdijk’s dichotomy, one may say that these characters justified Soviet cynicism by transforming it into kynicism

3 Blat is a system of unofficial exchanges of goods and service that existed throughout the Soviet period compensating for shortages of consumer goods and unavailability of services. According to Ledeneva, while being an obvious “transgression of social boundaries predetermined by the system,” blat also functioned as its necessary component—“a reaction of ordinary people to the structural constraints of the socialist system of distribution—a series of practices, which enabled the Soviet system to function and made it tolerable” (Ledeneva 1998: 3).

4 On the relation of the trickster figure to Soviet modernity see also Fitzpatrick (2005) and Yuri Slezkine (2005).

– a playful and non-pragmatic version of cynicism. 2
 Their function precisely corresponded to Sloterdijk's formula: "Cynicism can only be stemmed by cynicism, not by morality" (1987: 194). This is exactly what Soviet tricksters managed to do. Thus they simultaneously justified the "self-subversive nature of the Soviet system" (Ledeneva 2006), and offered a viable and incredibly attractive alternative to its practical cynicism.

The cynical character of social survival not only did not fade away in the post-Soviet years, rather it became a proud social norm. Surprisingly, in this period the trickster trope visibly lost its transgressive and liberating power. Admittedly, the late Soviet and post-Soviet years are marked by the monumental life-long trickster performance of Dmitrii Prigov (1940-2007). Among a few successful examples of tricksters in post-Soviet culture most prominent and original versions were produced by performance artists (Oleg Kulik, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro, The Blue Noses Group, and such collectives as E.T.I. and Voina). Notably, a few female tricksters have appeared in this period both in popular culture – Masiana from Oleg Kuvaev's animated films series and Vika, the protagonist of *My Fairy Nanny*, the Russian re-make of the American sitcom *The Nanny*; in postmodernist literature – the werefox A Huli from Viktor Pelevin's *The Sacred Book of a Werewolf* (2004). The decline of the tricksters' prominence in culture is (over)compensated by the surge of trickster-like figures on the political and social scene, from the ever-popular Vladimir Zhirinovskii to cinematically lionized Boris Berezhovskii and Sergei Mavrodi, and the now forgotten Dmitrii Iakubovskii ("general Dima"), Duma deputy Viacheslav Marychev.

The deconstructive power of the trickster's transgressions decreased significantly in the post-Soviet context, most likely because it was the time when the second, blat-based economy and sociality, radically moved to the forefront of society (Ledeneva 2006), and the qualities typically associated with tricksterdom, transformed into the normalized *mainstream* conditions of success and capitalist efficiency – at least, in public consciousness and media representation. Furthermore, the trickster's transgression and his/her liminality, requires a clear sense of societal borders and taboo, and this sense has vanished in the 1990s.

Pussy Riot are direct heirs to the trickster line in Soviet and post-Soviet culture. The trickster's

liminality typically generates ambivalence and functions as a mediator, while his/her transgressions of societal norms acquire the role of non-pragmatic, artistic gestures. At the same time, these transgressions establish a paradoxical, non-orthodox, relationship connecting the trickster with the sacred (Laura Makarius 1993). All these characteristics perfectly fit Pussy Riot and can be seen quite easily. For instance, very illuminating is the use of the balaclava, which after the Pussy Riot affair became a world-wide symbol of cultural protest. With its carnival-like colours, it not only unites the participants into a collective trickster – leaving its borders open for anybody willing to join. Furthermore, it creates an internal liminal zone, shared by all participants of the action, – which by the way, explains why members of the group stripped of their balaclavas are as different, both in their manner and discourse, from Pussy Riot as a collective trickster.

It is also no accident that Nadezhda Tolokonnikova considers Prigov to be the person and artist who opened up the world of contemporary art for her. By her own acknowledgement, the performance she attended in Norilsk at the age of 16 defined the subsequent course of her life. At one of the court sessions, she brought a home-made poster with a quotation from his poem. And her own writing style, combining sophisticated post-Structuralist and gender studies' terminology with slang is strikingly reminiscent of the writings of the female fox-trickster from Pelevin's *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*; by the way, the fox's name is A Huli – no less indecent to the Russian ear than Pussy Riot is to the English.

However, since the trickster's feature characteristics take on new forms and new ramifications in each cultural period and with each individual trickster, we must briefly sketch the new cultural significance of the trickstar plot generated by Pussy Riot. Obviously, Pussy Riot lent the trickster trope a renewed deconstructive force but they also filled the trickster's actions with the unprecedented power of *political* transgression. In Kevin Platt's (2012) words, "While response to the open-ended nature of the

happening generated at times potentially contradictory significances and alignments, this is surely a symptom of the success of Pussy Riot's strategy." Mikhail Iampolskii (2012) adds: "... such actions gain meaning only in the context of the reaction that they prompt. One might even say that the reactions is virtually the main component of the action."⁵

Responses and reactions to Pussy Riot not to mention the group's prosecution and imprisonment, also included tremendous public debates surrounding both the performance and the subsequent trial of the performers. What aspects of Pussy Riot's performance triggered such powerful effects, effects that are sometimes artistic, sometimes ideological, sometimes political, but always incredibly explosive?

5 "подобные [Pussy Riot] акции приобретают смысл только в контексте реакций, которые они вызывают. Можно даже сказать, что реакция – едва ли не основной компонент действия."

3

Seeking answers to these questions, many sympathetic commentators of the Pussy Riot performance evoked the image of a holy fool.⁶ Tolokonnikova (2012) in her closing statement directly referred to this cultural model: “We were searching for real sincerity and simplicity, and we found these qualities in the *yurodstvo* [the holy foolishness] of punk.” (This is, by the way, a very strange choice of words, considering the fact that a holy fool is anything but sincere.) However, Sergei Ivanov (2006), a prominent expert in this subject, and author of the cultural history of holy fools, argued in the discussion about Pussy Riot that this parallel is inadequate for multiple reasons – mostly, because a holy fool’s act always serves as a demonstration of a higher truth, in comparison to which all other “truths” and values look worthless and deserve ridiculing and utter degradation.⁷ In his book, while noting the kinship between holy fools and mythological tricksters (sacred clowns), Ivanov (2006: 16) emphasizes the difference between the holy fool’s actions and jest: “... a jester is all in a dialogue, a holy fool is monological by the principle; the jester immerses into the holiday time, while the holy fool is outside of time; jest is similar to art, while the holy foolishness is foreign to art.” I would add to this argument that although a holy fool is indeed a trickster, his/her act is entirely locked within the religious paradigm, while Pussy Riot’s performance in the cathedral is definitely situated not within this paradigm, but also not entirely outside of it.

After all, they did not axe icons as did Avdei Ter-Oganian in his 1998 performance “The Young Atheist”. They prayed to the Mother of God in the country’s main cathedral. On the other hand, their famous video repeatedly switches registers from Orthodox prayer and bowing, to rock danc-

ing and singing, with the refrain *Sran’ gospodnia* rhythmically replacing traditional *Halleluiah*. The performance’s visual aesthetics paradoxically fuses the church gilding with the bright colours of the performers’ dresses and balaklavas. As lampolskii notes, not only are Pussy Riot’s outfits reminiscent of Malevich’s late paintings, but their entire aesthetic is based on rapid shifts between sacred and profane signifiers, which is quite typical of the Russian avant-garde.⁸ Mariia Alëkhina and Tolokonnikova’s closing statements only enhanced this impression of “switching the registers”: while being accused of blasphemy, they demonstrated deep knowledge of Gospels.

Thus, Pussy Riot as tricksters have situated their performance on the borderline between sacred and profane, between church and counterculture, thereby revealing a liminal, ambivalent, and explosive zone of contemporary Russian society and politics. Boris Groys emphasizes this aspect of the Pussy Riot performance in his apt commentary:

And if, for example, Pussy Riot makes an action—and not even really an action, as they are simply gathering material that they use in their video—, then it’s unclear whether or not they are breaking the law. This is a controversial question related to the law, to boundaries between secular and religious legislation, and so on. In other words, this action exposes a problem that hitherto had not been at the centre of attention, and had never been thematised. This action is consistent with the meaning of contemporary art. It has brought out a certain contemporary order of things. A contemporary order of things that is unclear [...] Pussy Riot has drawn society’s attention to the complicated relationship between sacred and secular space, between art and religion, and art and the law. They have made this zone visible. Thus society has been riled up and started to discuss it. If they hadn’t

6 See Aleksei Murav’ev (2012), Sakharov Center (2012), Georgii Satarov (2012), and Mikhail Strel’tsov (2012).

7 See the video recording of the discussion at Sakharov Museum in Moscow (Sakharov Center 2012).

8 Numerous deep connections of the Pussy Riot performance with the avant-garde were analysed by lampolskii (2012).

done it, there would have been no resonance (Iurii Saprykin 2012).⁹

The subsequent persecution of the group has only confirmed the ambivalent relationship between secular and sacred, political and clerical. The explosive meaning of this ambivalence became painfully obvious when the Pussy Riot members were charged in criminal court with offending the religious feelings of believers, while their true and open offense was to critique the union between the Orthodox church and Putin's state, and, certainly, Putin himself. "Experts" cited in their educated conclusion the rulings of the Laodicean (363 A.D.) and Trullan (691-692 A.D.) Synods, and the secular court used these arguments to justify the criminal verdict, and so on.

4

The creation and exposure of various zones of ambivalence and liminality is the true calling of all tricksters. Looking at Pussy Riot from this perspective, one may expand on Groys' interpretation, saying that the disclosure of the unclear and ambivalent relationship between the secular state and the Orthodox Church, as the events and debates following the performance demonstrated, is not the sole effect of Pussy Riot's trickster's transgression. Apparently, their performance became such

9 "А если, например, Pussy Riot делают акцию — причем это даже не акция, они собирают материалы и используют их в своем видео, — то неизвестно, нарушают ли они закон или нет. Это спорная проблема, относящаяся к закону, к границам между светским и духовным законодательством и так далее. Иначе говоря, эта акция выявляет проблему, которая до этого не была в центре внимания и вообще не тематизировалась. Эта акция отвечает смыслу современного искусства. Она вывела некое современное положение вещей. Современное положение вещей, которое неясно. [...] Pussy Riot зафиксировали и открыли вниманию общества сложные отношения между сакральным и секулярным пространством, между искусством и религией, искусством и законом. Они всю эту зону сделали явной. Поэтому общество возбудилось и начало это обсуждать. Если бы они этого не сделали, никакого резонанса бы не было."

a fantastic success because it managed to reveal multiple layers of ambivalence and undecidability, which appeared not to be limited to the relationship between "sacred and secular space, art and religion, art and law."

The site of their performance contributed greatly to this virtual explosion of ambivalence. After all, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is not only the symbol of a newly found alliance between the Putinist state and the Orthodox Church, or the Church's corruption and cynical entrepreneurship. Demolished in 1931, and re-built from scratch in 1994-7, it epitomizes the overarching post-Soviet project: the restoration of the "national tradition" and traditional values, in other words, neo-traditionalism. Since the early 2000s, Boris Dubin and Lev Gudkov have warned that a vague, yet, clearly conservative concept of neo-traditionalism had effectively united the majority of intelligentsia and "siloviki":

"The rebirth of the great power" has become that sole symbolic thesis on which liberal Westerners, Communist patriots, and crusaders for "holy Orthodox Rus" can come together. Its component elements, the definition of the great power's "majesty," as well as the means for achieving this goal, may vary greatly, but the general programmatic composition is unchanged (Gudkov 2004: 660).

...institutions and organizations that could be considered secular and modern spark the population's mistrust and dissatisfaction, while Russians connect a positive orientation and evaluation with the remaining meanings of a realm that is outside of any competition, that is special and that appeals to the past, to traditions, to authority, and particularly to ritualistic and the ceremonial (Dubin 2011: 255).

If in the 1990s the models for past authoritative traditions were situated in pre-Soviet Russia, in the 2000s this source of neo-traditionalism was supplemented by a newly-found nostalgia for Soviet

“greatness”, creating a longing for the Great Empire across the ages. As Gudkov and Dubin have shown, the neo-traditionalism launched by democrats in the 1990s paved the way for nostalgia for the great imperial power and, essentially, for the Putin regime’s cultural rhetoric and politics, including the recent neo-imperialist turn supported by the majority of population.

From this perspective the clericalization of Russian politics and its growing religious fundamentalism are just one of the aspects of the neo-traditionalist ideology that is the true target of the Pussy Riot performance. The “indecent” vocabulary and behaviour in the sacred space, the inappropriately “provocative” clothing as well as the support for gay rights (“гей-прайд отправлен в Сибирь в кандалах” / “Gay Pride is sent to Siberia in chains”), the sarcasm towards widespread patriarchal convictions (“чтобы Святейшего не оскорбить, женщинам надо рожать и любить” / “In order not to offend His Holiness, women must give birth and love”), and the direct appeal to feminism (“Богородица, Дево, стань феминисткой, Стань феминисткой, феминисткой стань” / “Mother of God, become a feminist!”) – did not aim at Putin’s union with clerics *per se*, but at neo-traditionalist values in general. These values embrace the tendencies towards authoritarianism and fundamentalism, homophobia and patriarchal repression against women, anti-feminism; the vision of “culture” as a collection of “harmonious” masterpieces and the negation of “ugly” and “immoral” contemporary art.

It is a little wonder that Pussy Riot’s performance has generated anger and indignation among Russian conservatives. Their point of view was voiced with ardour by those prominent cultural figures who supported the persecution of the group members: Nikita Mikhalkov, Stanislav Govorukhin, Valentin Rasputin, Vladimir Krupin, Elena Vaenga, Vladimir Solov’ëv, Mikhail Leont’ev, Oleg Gazmanov, Tamara Gverdtsiteli, Sergei Luk’ianenko, Dmitrii Puchkov (Goblin), Iosif Kobzon, Aleksandr Prokhanov, and

many others. Their position was well summarized by the TV anchor Leont’ev (2012):

The targets are chosen quite simply: the church, traditional morality, state institutions, political power, and they are covered almost literally in shit, and this is set forth as an act of art.¹⁰

However, many of those Russian celebrities and members of the intelligentsia who allegedly supported Pussy Riot and expressed their protest against the trial and the verdict, felt the need to admit that they were either offended on religious grounds or found the performance immoral and offensive to believers. These statements typically coupled or alternated with apologetic remarks, according to which the defence of Pussy Riot members as victims of the system did not negate the despicable aesthetic aspects of the performance, which was defined as appalling, talentless, and tasteless. In other words, these supporters of the punk-group resisted political violence but silently accepted and sincerely promoted the following neo-traditionalist axioms: a) art and any other form of cultural activity has to be judged by the criteria of morality, while the latter is defined, predominantly if not exclusively, by the religious, i.e. Russian Orthodox, norm; b) non-classical, especially contemporary art, is not art at all, it does not belong to the sphere of culture and has to be treated as acts of “petty hooliganism”.

In other words, while criticizing the system for political persecution, these supporters would not mind the (certainly less harsh) persecution of Pussy Riot for moral/ religious and aesthetic transgressions. To name just a few, among those who expressed their protest against the trial of Pussy Riot, such opinions were expressed by Boris Nemtsov, Boris Grebenshchikov, Al’fred Kokh, Anastasiia Volochkova, Aleksei Navalnyi, Andrei Makarevich, Oleg Basilashvili, and some others.

10 “Выбираются просто цели: церковь, традиционная мораль, государственные институты, политическая власть и обливаются почти в буквальном смысле говном, причем это выдается как акт искусства.”

Aside from these “minor disagreements” between conservatives and liberals, there is a third large problem with the liberal intelligentsia’s perception of the group and its actions: Pussy Riot’s feminism. Pussy Riot members persistently emphasize the feminist core of their artistic strategy. Yet, the feminist component of their performance (including the genetic links of Pussy Riot to such western groups as Guerilla Girls, Bikini Kill, and Riot Grrrl) is typically overlooked and treated as irrelevant in Russia, although this is clearly not the case.¹¹ Even by addressing their prayer not to Christ (to whom the cathedral where the action took place, is dedicated) but to the Mother of God, Pussy Riot clearly expressed the desire to challenge the patriarchal authorities – in both the secular and religious spheres. It is also no accident that the visual image of the Pussy Riot members, while being clearly feminine, is deprived of anything that can be used for the sexist objectification of a woman. Ekaterina Samutsevich says: “Our image is rather androgynous – a creature in a dress and colourful tights. Somebody like a woman but without a woman’s hair and face. An androgynic that looks like a cartoon character or superhero” (Sobchak and Sokolova 2012).¹² This androgynous, yet recognizably female image is that of the trickstar – a liminal figure, transgressive mediator, a provocateur of ambivalence.

However, Daniil Dugum, back in March 2012, warned: “Pussy Riot is necessary to liberal society

as an anti-Putinist project, rather than an anti-patriarchal one.”¹³ The subsequent development of the public discourse on Pussy Riot has unmistakably confirmed this prediction. Characteristically, the strongest leitmotif, unifying many liberal “supporters” of Pussy Riot, considered their gender-based intellectual inferiority. First and foremost, they were almost universally treated as silly girls – the degree of intellectual deficiency assigned to Pussy Riot in the statements of the group’s liberal supporters spread from “fools” (durochki) and “thoughtless” (ne ochen’ dumaiushchie) to “retarded” (debilki). For instance, Navalnyi (2012), one of the leaders of the protest movement, while supporting Pussy Riot politically, expressed his attitude to their performance in the following terms:

The action in the CCS was idiotic, no argument there. To put it mildly, I wouldn’t like it very much if, when I was in church, some crazy girls ran in and started circling around the altar. The indisputable fact is that these are idiots who engaged in petty hooliganism for the sake of publicity.¹⁴

“Idiotic action”, “crazy girls”, “idiots”, “petty hooliganism for the sake of publicity” – this set of assessments sounds no better than Dmitrii Medvedev’s famous “I want to throw up” (“menia toshnit”) prefacing his plea (the plea of the prime minister!) to soften Pussy Riot’s verdict. Actually, this seems typical as a reaction to trickstars’ actions in patriarchal society: “Trickstars as wise fools rarely occur. Rather, women are generally depicted as simply foolish – ignorant, gullible, incompetent. While they are fooled by tricks, they are not the conscious players of tricks” (Jurich 1989: 38).

11 See Elena Gapova (2012), Vera Akulova (2013), and Kseniia Sobchak and Elena Sokolova (2012). Ekaterina Samutsevich says: “We were just hanging and watching performances, works of western feminist artists Guerilla Girls, Riot Grrrls etc. We absorbed this all, then started playing with words, and in such a way the name Pussy Riot was conceived. We decided to write songs in the punk style, punk feminism. This is a well-known trend, for instance, in the US.” “Мы просто сидели и смотрели акции, работы западных художниц-феминисток ‘Гирилья Герлз’, ‘Райот Герл’ и т. д. Мы впитывали все это, потом начали играть словами, и так было придумано название Pussy Riot. Решили, что будем писать песни в стиле панк, панк-феминизм. Это хорошо известное направление, например, в Америке” (Sobchak and Sokolova 2012).

12 “У нас скорее андрогинный образ — некое существо в платье и цветных колготках. Что-то похожее на женщину, но при этом без женского лица, без волос. Андрогин, похожий на героя из мультиков, супергероя.”

13 “Pussy Riot нужны либеральной общественности не как антипатриархальный, а как антипутинский и антиклерикальный проект.”

14 “Акция их в ХСС — идиотская, и спорить тут нечего. Мне бы, мягко говоря, не понравилось, если в тот момент, когда я в церкви, туда забежали какие-то чокнутые девицы и стали бегать вокруг алтаря. Имеем неоспоримый факт: дуры, совершившие мелкое хулиганство ради паблисити.”

Secondly, Pussy Riot was repeatedly described as lacking any sense of agency, being somebody's puppet. Curiously, this motif has once again connected some liberals with all conservatives. The difference is rather technical, since liberal blogs and media appointed to the role of the "girls" male "master" either Pëtr Verzilov as their alleged "producer" or hidden enemies of Patriarch Kirill; while in conservative circles Pussy Riot was declared to be manipulated by the "West", Berezovskii, or the opposition. Yet, even among some liberals, the closing statements by Pussy Riot members were met with distrust: who has written these texts for the "girls"?

The gender terror against Pussy Riot reached its peak in the motif of physical punishment that would be more appropriate for them than prison. The idea of a desirable, or even merciful spanking of Pussy Riot members was expressed by many "supporters", beginning with the known leader of the protest movement, Nemtsov and seconded by the actor and director Ivan Okhlobystin as well as the Communist leader Gennadii Ziuganov (to name just a few, since 27% of those polled by VTSIOM has supported this brilliant proposition). No wonder this led to Kirill Kobrin's sarcastic commentary:

There's that tone in some Russian liberal quarters—the arrogant, macho disdain for the opposite sex, which posits that woman, by definition, is incapable of conscious action... Here I see a stark disconnect between their democratic, liberal views and the profoundly macho, and, when it comes down to it, profoundly Soviet authoritarian consciousness (Andrei Sharogradskii 2012).¹⁵

Jurich (1989: 34) suggested that the trickstar's strategy typically transforms (gender) powerlessness

15 "Вот этот тон части русской либеральной общественности – высокомерное мачистское неуважение к другому полу, исходя из которого женщина, по определению, не может произвести сознательного действия... Я вижу здесь абсолютное несовпадение их демократических, либеральных убеждений с глубоко мачистским и глубоко, по сути дела, советским авторитарным сознанием." See also Marina Verigina (2012) and Borianna Rossa (2012).

into a trick: "woman by virtue of gender alone has been marginalized; and trickstar is a twice-marginal figure. The difference is that the trickstar uses marginality for her advantage, is *intentionally* impertinent and indecent, violating norms in order to invigorate society..." This characteristic perfectly fits Pussy Riot, yet with an important qualification: their trick manifests itself through the most blatant exposure of their powerlessness – in the court that has become the spectacle of lawlessness and in the public discourse that has exploded into a similar spectacle of sexist repression.¹⁶

5

These effects of Pussy Riot's performance are no less significant than their exposure of the state's unwillingness to separate the "offence to the King" from the "offence to the feelings of believers". The discourse triggered by Pussy Riot within the liberal intelligentsia reveal the hypocrisy of the liberal opposition, which supported "girls" only as the irritant to their enemies, while not so secretly despising them as silly manipulated puppets who should be physically punished for their shameful transgression. Furthermore, this debate laid bare the responsibility of the neo-traditionalist ideology, shared by many representatives (if not a sheer majority) of the liberal intelligentsia, for the Putin regime's ideology and growing Orthodox fundamentalism.

To sum up, the Pussy Riot debate has revealed such flaws in the liberal discourse as the silent equation of moral values with religious doctrines; a hierarchical, essentialist and, basically, pre-modern, understanding of culture (rejecting contemporary art for the lack of "harmony"); and, most importantly, the allegiance to patriarchal stereotypes. The shared values that are responsible for these flaws, appear

16 Tellingly, even sympathetic and overtly liberal Sobchak could not understand how Pussy Riot members in their spare time could discuss such issues as sexism (Sobchak and Sokolova 2012). For a commentary of Sobchak's symptomatic "cluelessness" see Eliot Borenstein (2012).

not so different from the conservatives' rage against "blasphemy" and the assault on the national "spiritual ties" (*dukhovnye skrepy*, to use Putin's words); aggressive "defence" of "eternal" moral/religious values epitomized by the disgust for contemporary art.

Thus, the Pussy Riot debate situated the zone of ambivalence not only between the state and church, art and religion, religion and aesthetics, etc., etc., but also, and most importantly, between the opposition to the Putin regime and its supporters. This effect is comparable with the one produced by Soviet tricksters, yet in an inverted form. As mentioned above, Soviet tricksters by their artistic transgressions culturally justified a hidden layer of Soviet social and economic reality, proving by their cynical performances that "underground" activities are vital for the survival of the official system. Pussy Riot, willingly or not, has demonstrated the opposite – that the forces that, seemingly, undermine the authorities, share with them most fundamental values, coinciding in a basic interpretation of moral, cultural, and gender hierarchies, and differ only in a tactical understanding of political issues. The patriarchal "tune", uniting critics and supporters of the punk group, turns out to be the decisive factor: indeed, in the long run, it justifies the autocratic regime better than any political rhetoric.

From this standpoint, the overwhelming support for the neo-conservative and neo-imperialist agenda of Russia's government after the annexation of Crimea and invasion in Ukraine, does not seem so unexpected. Pussy Riot's performance has revealed the underlying cultural deficiencies, which, in a crisis, have produced appropriate political consensus. The punk prayer has revealed that in contemporary Russia the cultural is political, which also explains the split of the liberal movement caused by the events of 2014-15.

A famous writer of liberal political convictions, Dmitrii Bykov in his improvised verse commentary to Pussy Riot's arrest in March 2012 wrote:

И, куда страшней для всякой гнуси

Всенародно чаемый итог –

Чтобы вместо riot of the pussy,

Тут случился riot of the cock

What would be worse that such a strange and fussy

scandal sparked by performers of punk rock,

Could only be if a riot of the pussy,

Were replaced with a riot of the cock.¹⁷

In contrast to this wishful thinking, Pussy Riot has demonstrated an uncanny symmetry between the authoritarianism of the Putin regime and the patriarchal neo-traditionalism of its opponents (and some of Pussy Riot's "supporters"). In this respect, the "riot of the pussy" appears to be much more radical than "the riot of the cock." Apparently, in contemporary Russia, the trickstar's transgression goes much deeper and produces much more profound effects than that of the male trickster.¹⁸

Bio

Mark Lipovetsky

University of Colorado-Boulder

mark.leiderman@Colorado.edu

Mark Lipovetsky (b. 1964) is a Russian-American literary scholar and critic, Professor of Russian Studies at the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Colorado-Boulder. Since the 1990s, Russian postmodernist

¹⁷ See Bykov's reading of this poem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UikMqS9sA30> Trans. Eliot Borenstein.

¹⁸ This proposition can be convincingly illustrated by a comparison of Pussy Riot with the subject of analogous discussion in the *Slavic Review* – Borat from Sacha Baron Cohen's feature film. See the 2008 "Borat: Selves and Others" section in *Slavic Review* 67 (1). Especially on Borat as trickster see Natalie Kononenko and Svitlana Kukharenska (2008). – An earlier version of this article was published in Russian (Lipovetskii 2013).

literature and culture remain in the center of his interests. In 1996, he defended one of the first doctoral dissertations on this subject. He is the author of numerous articles published in the United States, Russia, and Europe, eight books, and co-editor of seven volumes on Russian literature and culture, among them anthologies of Russian twentieth-century short stories (2011), *Jolly Little Characters: Cult Heroes of the Soviet Childhood* (2008), and *Non-Canonical Classic: Dmitri A. Prigov* (2010). Currently, Lipovetsky works on a critical biography of Dmitry Prigov and edits his collected works. Lipovetsky's works were nominated for Russian Little Booker Prize (1997) and short-listed for the Andrey Bely Prize (2008). His last monograph is on *Charms of Cynical Reason: The Transformations of the Trickster Trope in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011).

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford.
- Akulova, Vera. 2013. "Pussy Riot. Gender and Class." In *Post-Post-Soviet? Art, Politics & Society in Russia at the Turn of the Decade*, edited by Marta Dziewanska, Ekaterina Degot', and Il'ia Budrait-skis, 279–87. Warsaw.
- Babcock-Abrahams, Barbara. 1975. "'A Tolerated Margin of Mess'. The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11 (3): 161–5.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin.
- Borenstein, Eliot. 2012. "Kseniia Sobchak, Puzzled by Sexism." <http://jordanrussiacenter.org/news/kseniia-sobchak-puzzled-by-sexism/#.VN3fOvnF-Sp>.
- Doty, William G., and William J. Hynes. 1993. "Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues. The Problem of the Trickster." In *Mythical Trickster Figures. Contours, Contexts, and Criticism*, edited by William J. Hynes, 13–32. Tualoosa; London.
- Dubin, Boris. 2011. *Rossiia nulevykh. Politicheskaia kul'tura, istoricheskaia pamiat', povsednevnaia zhizn'*. Moscow.
- Dugum, Daniil. 2012. "Prekrasnyi, to est' vtorostepennyi, pol." <http://os.colta.ru/art/events/details/35486/>.
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. 2005. *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton.
- Gapova, Elena. 2012. "Delo 'Pussy Riot'. Feministskii protest v kontekste klassovoi bor'by." *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 85 (5). <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/2794>.
- Gudkov, Lev. 2004. *Negativnaia identichnost'. Stat'i 1997-2002*. Moscow.
- Hyde, Lewis. 1998. *Trickster Makes This World. Mischief, Myth and Art*. New York.
- Iampolskii, Mikhail. 2015. "Tri sloia teksta na odnu izvilinu vlasti." <http://www.newtimes.ru/articles/detail/55977>.
- Ivanov, Sergei. 2005. *Blazhennye Pkhaby. Kul'turnaia Istoriia Iurodstva*. Moscow.
- Ivanov, Sergei. 2006. *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond*. Translated by Simon Frank. Oxford.
- Jung, Carl G. 1972. "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure." In *The Trickster. A Study in American Indian Mythology. With commentaries by Karl Kerényi and C. G. Yung*, by Paul Radin, 195–211. New York.
- Jurich, Marilyn. 1989. *Scheherazade's Sisters. Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature*. Westport; London.

- Kerényi, Karl. 1972. "The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology." In *The Trickster. A Study in American Indian Mythology. With commentaries by Kar Kerényi and C.G. Yung*, by Paul Radin, 173–91. New York.
- Kononenko, Natalie, and Svitlana Kukharenko. 2008. "Borat the Trickster. Folklore and the Media, Folklore in the Media." *Slavic Review* 67 (1): 8–18.
- Ledeneva, Alena V. 1998. *Russia's Economy of Favours. Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge, MA; London.
- Ledeneva, Alena V. 2006. *How Russia Really Works. The Informal Practices That Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business*. Ithaca.
- Leont'ev, Mikhail. 2012. "Nikto ne izvlechet urokov iz Pussy Riot." http://actualcomment.ru/leontev_nikto_ne_izvlechet_urokov_iz_dela_pussy_riot.html.
- Lipovestkii, Mark. 2013. "Pussy Riot. Trikster i sovremennyi gendernyi rezhim." *Izvestiia Ural'skogo federal'nogo universiteta. Serii "Obshchestvennye nauki"* 5 (112): 15–28.
- Lowie, Robert H. 1990. "The Trickster-Hero Discussion." *Journal of American Folklore* 22: 431–33.
- Makarius, Laura. 1993. "The Myth of Trickster. The Necessary Breaker of Taboos." In *Mythical Trickster. Figures, Contours, Contexts, and Criticism*, edited by William J. Hynes, 66–86. Tualoosa; London.
- Murav'ev, Aleksei. 2012. "'Tri shchelchka popu', ili Novoe iurodstvo kak refleks." http://www.polit.ru/article/2012/04/23/Riot_three_kicks/.
- Navalny, Aleksei. 2012. "Navalny vstupil'sia za Pussy Riot, khotia i priznal ikh aktsiui idiotskoi." <http://www.rbcdaily.ru/politics/562949983174898>.
- Platt, Kevin. 2012. "Examining International Media Coverage and Responses to Pussy Riot." <https://cgcsblog.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/examining-international-media-coverage-and-responses-to-pussy-riot-by-kevin-m-f-platt/>.
- Rossa, Borianna. 2012. "Pussy Riot kak vozhdelenie." <http://poslezavtra.be/optics/2012/11/08/pussy-riot-kak-vozhdelenie-pochemu-ya-podderzhivayu-pussy-riot-no-ne-razdelyayu-argumentov-v-ih-zaschitu.html>.
- Sakharov Center. 2012. "Pussy Riot i iurodstvo." <http://www.sakharov-center.ru/discussions/?id=1663>.
- Saprykin, Iurii. 2012. "'Dumaete, zapadnaia publika liubit sovremennoe iskusstvo? Ni figa podobnogo?' Boris Grois o Pussy Riot, fundamentalistakh i pobede video." <http://gorod.afisha.ru/archive/boris-grojs-o-pussy-riot-fundamentalistah-i-zasil-e-videorolikov/>.
- Satarov, Georgii. 2012. "Koshchunstvo vmesto iurodstva." <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=12178#>.
- Sharogradskii, Andrei. 2012. "Obozrevatel' RS Kirill Kobrin - o smesi Govorukhina s Mikhalkovym." <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/24662246.html>.
- Slezkine, Yuri. 2005. *The Jewish Century*. Princeton; Oxford.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 1987. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Translated by Michael Eldred. Minneapolis.
- Sobchak, Kseniia, and Elena Sokolova. 2012. "Ekaterina Samutsevich. Neraschekhlennaia." *Snob*. <http://snob.ru/selected/entry/53946>.
- Strel'tsov, Mikhail. 2012. "Vsë Ne Prosto Rait." <http://kbanda.ru/index.php/culture-miscellaneous-2/obshchestvo/261-obshchestvo/2770-vsjo-ne-prosto-rajt-razmyshleniya-v-otpuske.html>.
- Tolokonnikova, Nadezhda. 2012. "Closing Statement." <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/pussy-riot-closing-statements/>.

Verigina, Marina. 2012. "O roli sado-mazo v dele Pussy Riot." <http://forum-msk.org/material/society/9550027.html>.

Žižek, Slavoj. 2001. *Did Sombody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion*. London; New York.

Suggested Citation

Lipovetsky, Mark 2015. "Pussy Riot as the Trickstar." *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* 1. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17892/app.2015.0001.5>

URL: <http://www.apparatusjournal.net/>

Copyright: The text of this article has been published under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> This license does not apply to the media referenced in the article, which are subject to the individual rights owner's terms.